

# A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

*Interview with Ms Naseema Mohamed Kaleyfaaanu  
Interviewer: Ms Hafeeza Ibrahim, Senior lecturer, SN/MNU*



*The following interview is carried out as one of the activities to celebrate 2020 as the Year of the Nurse-midwife. The purpose of the interview is to acknowledge Ms. Naseema Mohamed Kaleyfaanu for her invaluable services to nursing and to the country and to share her experiences, especially with the younger generations. It is hoped that **Naseema's experiences and insights will inspire the nurses and nursing students of the present day.***

**HAFEEZA** - Let me begin by congratulating this year 2020 to be the Year of the Nurse and Midwife!

Naseema, first of all thank you for giving me this opportunity. It is an honour to meet you and thank you for sharing your experiences of being a nurse in Male' in the 1960s and later in the 1980s. I also had the privilege to work with you at the Central Hospital in the 1980s. I am doing this interview especially because I would like our younger generations to have a glimpse of what being a nurse was like in those times.

**NASEEMA**- Hafeeza, I can remember working with you in the Central hospital, specially the duties done in Labour Room then.

**HAFEEZA**- Naseema, could you please describe for me how you began your nursing career?

**NASEEMA**-When we were going to school in Sri Lanka, Colombo, we always knew we will have to do our O' Levels and then go for higher studies in whichever field we wanted to choose. So from the very beginning we thought, Moomina, myself and Aisha (Aishath Ibrahim Didi) we, three of us were studying together; it was nice to think about and plan what we were going to do.

**HAFEEZA**- So you had these thoughts even from school time!

**NASEEMA**- It wasn't school days but after school. Because we kept on hearing about all the health problems that we had in the Maldives, health problems because we didn't have trained people. So the best thing we could do was to volunteer our services too.

**HAFEEZA**- I used to hear that the government selected 3 or 4 girls from 3 “good” families and that is how professional nursing started in this country.

**NASEEMA**- Well, I don't think they chose us because of such character, I think it was just they wanted people whom they could trust and those who could go ahead; who would not throw away their careers. Maybe it was that! And then our families were also people who have been serving the government for many, many years: my father, Moomina's father and mother and Aisha's father.

This is how it started. We were in Colombo, and anything we had to do (such as obtaining visas), we could complete in Colombo. It was rather frightening for me because I had never been to any place, outside of Sri Lanka. I never travelled by myself. I completed my nursing training in Vellore, India.

**HAFEEZA**- Could you please tell us how you began your nursing career in Male'?”

**NASEEMA**- We were in different batches in Vellore (India). Moomina went to study first. Then myself and Aisha went after I did. So Moomina came back first, then I did, then after an year Aisha joined.

**HAFEEZA**- Then, when you came and joined that was the Government Hospital that time. Right?

**NASEEMA**- I would like to add that Aisha's father was the Prime Minister then and she still accepted to do nursing. You can see how humble she was, her Father allowed her. Aisha was such a simple dedicated nurse. In most places she would not be allowed to work like that. I want to point out that it was not because of the status in the country, but her dedication.



*With Naseema M. Kaleyfaanu at Capping/Graduation of Nursing students (1987)*

**HAFEEZA**- So Naseema, when you came and joined the Government Hospital that time, what was the situation like for a nurse?

**NASEEMA**- It was a very good thing for me that Moomina had come earlier. Because I learnt a whole lot of things I needed to know from her experience.

**HAFEEZA**- Could you describe for me; what nursing was like those days?

**NASEEMA** - We had people who looked down on us because we cleaned bed pans and we did all the “menial” things which people thought were menial things. But very soon they realized that life was much easier as the nurses were around. I think you would have seen much of it yourself. So we were there just a little before you. And not that much change when you came.

When I worked earlier, it was very interesting. We had to make most of the decisions and it was not always seeing eye to eye with the government departments. We did not have health professionals in the government then. We had to make decisions for the people who were in charge of the Hospital also. I remember one time, we wanted an extra water outlet in the laundry. And they didn't want to spend money on it-something as simple as connecting a pipe for water to drain out.



**HAFEEZA** - What about the Medical Department? How many doctors were there then?

**NASEEMA** - One doctor for the whole Hospital and one WHO doctor (Consultant, working mostly in management).

**HAFEEZA** - How long were your duties?

**NASEEMA** - We were on duty 24 hours. We were on call.

**HAFEEZA** - What about telephones? How did the hospital get in touch with you?

**NASEEMA** - I had a landline at home. We didn't have our own bicycles even. And then the government provided us with a bicycle. That was quite wonderful! (chuckle)


**HAFEEZA** - did you do home visits? Did you have to conduct deliveries at home?


**NASEEMA** - Yes, we didn't have those UNICEF kits. So if we wanted to take some instruments, we had to boil the trays and the covers and everything and pack it in a sterile manner, and take it with us on the bicycle. People were very appreciative. Maldivians are usually very appreciative.


**HAFEEZA** - About how many in-patients would you have those days?


**NASEEMA** - Let me count: in the Kambaafaanu Ganduvaru, which is the first section, we would have about 8 patients. A King for his daughter built Kambaafaanu Ganduvaru. It was like a hall, which we converted into a hospital ward. We even bought material and made the curtains ourselves. We bought it from our own salaries. Rushdy helped me to take the measurements for the curtains. They came out well. Patients liked it (chuckle). On one side we made a Labour Room and a place to look after babies. Where ever we could find space and where ever we could give privacy, we put drapes and used those areas. For

example we needed space to keep things like bedpans.

 **HAFEENZA**- How many nurses did you have then? Were they mostly nursing aides?

 **NASEEMA**- No, there were no nurse aides. We were just the two of us, Moomina and I. We were the only trained nurses. Then there was a senior WHO nurse who was from Ireland. She guided us in teaching students. Some years earlier they had started a Nurse aide's classes. It was not the complete course. It was just the beginning. So there were about 8 or 9. And they were taught how to give injections, and do dressings. Zuleikha Jameel was among the first students. They were definitely very nice girls. Gentle and caring. They might not have had a lot of education, but were very good at doing what they knew. They were very kind and soft spoken. You couldn't even hear them speak! But they were very good in Dhivehi language.


 **HAFEENZA**- What were the main challenges that time?


 **NASEEMA**- I would say the lack of people who knew English. That was a main issue. There was always a three-way conversation. Because no one could translate for the patient. So one of us (Moomina or I) would translate. It was difficult to get someone who could do it well. But the doctor who was working when I arrived here, he was very well versed with the medicines that were absolutely necessary for the patients. We had conditions like Vitamin B deficiencies and worm infestation. When patients were given worm treatment, they would pass out a


lot of worms.


 **HAFEENZA**- What about night duties?


How did you manage that?


 **NASEEMA**- One of us would volunteer. If there were an emergency of course one of us would go. It was very difficult for our families too obviously. We would be called from home in the middle of the night. Although it would disturb our family members, these are things, which were unavoidable.


 **HAFEENZA**- Suppose you had an operation going on, you would be required to stay back after duty, right?

 **NASEEMA**- Yes. There would be only one doctor and we wouldn't do anything (any operations) but an emergency one.


 **HAFEENZA**- What type of surgeries were done that time?


 **NASEEMA**- Surgeries like hydrocele or caesarians will be done. Those surgeries that were beyond our capacity will be taken to Sri Lanka. Those days there was no airport, so keep that in mind. The patient will have to be taken by a sea boat until President Nasir got people together to build the airport.


 **HAFEENZA**- Before the trained midwives came what happened to the women who came with obstructed labour?


 **NASEEMA**- We would have to detect early and be sure that it's a case that will go for an obstruction. We were in desperation. When such cases come we were at a loss. We could only pray. That's all. When we cared for, for example the premature babies, we would


say to each other, Moomina and I, that we could do this, and we would pray and miraculously they would recover. It was very rarely that we wouldn't be able to save a child. It may be because we, and the girls (nurse aides) who helped us, we were all so careful.


 **HAFEEZA**- What is your advice for the present nurses, working in hospitals where they have the modern equipment etc.


 **NASEEMA**- I would say, be grateful to God for what you have now. Because, you know it takes a long time for yourself to get used to the difficulties of working with the lack of equipment. So actually you should be very happy and grateful to God for having the minimum amount of things you have now.


 **HAFEEZA**-What is something that has stayed in your mind all these years?


 **NASEEMA**-I remember a certain known person's death. That morning, he came; her husband came on his motor cycle and said my wife is in a very bad situation and asked me to go to his house. I got on his motor cycle and went with him. There was hardly anything we could do for her then. She was unconscious and bleeding. It was not possible to give blood transfusions then. There were no facilities for donation or storage of blood. We started that work too. That was after we transferred to the Government Hospital (ADK hospital building now). I used to discuss about having blood donation and storage. Then President Maumoon Abdul Qayyoom ordered those things to be started and it began. I don't have the dates.


 **HAFEEZA**- My purpose is for the present nurses and students to hear about what was the situation like those days, so I do not mind not having the dates.


 **NASEEMA**- In addition to working in the hospital in Male' we also had to travel to the other islands for carrying out vaccinations etc. but I can tell you there is nothing that I regret . It was just wonderful. Thinking about those times, gives me goose bumps.....we did so much and then to think if you.... If you were not there that time, that woman would have died..... It was Allah's Mercy! I remember one girl in Baa Kamadhoo. When my brother and his wife were there, they were very friendly with the people of that island. They respected them a lot. There I was called one day to go and see a very sick child. I said I don't think I could help even if I went because I was not a doctor. Then when I went and saw that child, I could figure out the child had symptoms of hypothyroidism. So I suggested that the child be taken to Male'. So we brought her to Male' and showed her to the doctor in Male' and started treatment. Within days, the child showed signs of improvement, it was like a miracle! The family had tried all sorts of witchcraft etc. before that as they could not understand what was happening to the child. The patient is still alive and very thankful to me.


 **HAFEEZA**- May Allah (SWT) bless you for all your efforts, Naseema!


 **NASEEMA**- Thank you, I must say, I was given the chance to help people.


 **HAFEEZA**- Even after being a first lady of this country, you still came back later and re-joined the hospital. What made you come back?

 **NASEEMA**- There were people who wanted me, that's what I thought. This was a place where I could use my brains and my energy.


 **HAFEEZA**- What is something you have always wished for the health system of this country?


 **NASEEMA**- I would like to see.... This bit I must tell you. When I first returned from Vellore, the most important thing is, then we were always at a lack of things. So I was looking forward to the day when we would have enough equipment and things. I wanted to see a Medical college here. And I wanted a Nursing school here. Honestly, I always wanted to see this!


 **HAFEEZA**- This year being the year of the Nurse and Midwife, we must celebrate the work you have started in those beginning days, and remember the challenges that you have faced. Without your efforts and those who were with you, we would not be where we are today. You have sowed the seeds to today's nursing surely for this country.

 **NASEEMA**- If I was working now in the same situation but at a different time, there are many things that now I think I could have done. I also remember the first Ramazan we had when I was here. It was very hot and we were exhausted. About midwives, we taught them how to take a delivery etc, in a sterile manner. And when they passed that test, each one would be given a "delivery kit". They were very happy and proud to obtain it. The kit would be wrapped in cloth and the midwives' assistant

would carry it when they went to visit a woman in labour. It was a great source of pride. I am very happy to relate to those times. The nice thing is I was reliving all my student days when I was working here.

 **HAFEEZA**- What is your advice for our current students?

 **NASEEMA**- Even if you are empty handed, the faith in Allah and the determination that I will not harm anyone and that I will do my best will go a long way. It is a motto- that you do not ever give up! We were always amazed how the little babies recovered. We had children with tetanus etc and they recovered. God is great!

 **HAFEEZA**- Thank you for sharing all these good memories. I am extremely grateful for you for relating your experiences and giving me your time. I must say I will cherish this time always. Thank you!